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Tape sez LBJ saw Fidel tied to slay of JFK

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Lyndon Johnson thought Cuban President Fidel Castro played a role in the 1963 assassination of President John Kennedy but worried that a retaliatory strike against Cuba could lead to nuclear war, according to a new book.

He said publicly blaming Castro would generate a public outcry for revenge on Cuba or the Soviet Union that could "check us into a war that can kill 40 million Americans in an hour."

According to the book, "The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964," by historian Michael Beschloss, Johnson also told the late Sen. Richard Russell in 1964 that he did not believe the conclusion of the Warren Commission, of which Russell was a member, that Kennedy was killed by a lone gunman.

The book casts Russell as a reluctant member of the commission who was pressured into signing the report against his will.

"I'm just worn out, fighting over that damned report," Russell is quoted as saying on one tape. "Well, I don't believe it."

"I don't either," Johnson said.

Newsweek, in its edition on newsstands today, carries excerpts from the book, which details conversations from the secret tape recordings Johnson kept running during his stay in the White House. The book, published by Simon & Schuster, is to appear in bookstores this week.

In another conversation with former Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield in May 1964, Johnson suggests he might use the FBI to investigate Republican campaign contributions to get back at them for investigating his family finances.

"They've been down inspecting Miz Johnson's property in Texas and they've harassed and harangued her every day since we've been here," he said. "The FBI can look into their contributions and it won't look very good."

The tapes reveal that Johnson had strong reservations about involvement in Vietnam.

"I stayed awake last night thinking of this thing," he tells his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, in May 1964. "It looks to me like we're getting into another Korea. . . . I don't think we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home. . . . I don't think it's worth fighting for. . . . It's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw."

Politics, the tapes reveal, was part of the decision to bomb North Vietnam in August 1964, following a second incident in the Gulf of Tonkin — which later was shown to never have happened.

After the first incident, Johnson called Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to instruct him to gather together members of the Senate and House Armed Services committees.

"I want to leave an impression on background . . . that we're gonna be firm as hell," the President said.